

The Survival of Adult Salmon and Steelhead

GUEST OPINION BY

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Date: October 5, 2005

All of us in the Pacific Northwest want to preserve wild salmon. Whether motivated by economic, recreational, or conservation concerns, we all recognize Pacific Northwest salmon as a national treasure and appreciate that salmon are critical to our economy, environment, and culture.

Even so, current efforts to preserve the salmon have come at a hefty price. A General Accounting Office report found that, in recent years, 11 federal agencies spent almost \$1.5 billion of our tax dollars annually to recover salmon and steelhead in the Columbia River Basin alone. The Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) is currently spending between \$600 million to \$700 million each year - dollars that come from Northwest electric ratepayers - to help fish and wildlife, most of which goes toward salmon recovery. Partly as a result, BPA rates are higher than they should be, impacting Northwest jobs, output, and income. Salmon-motivated land and water-use restrictions continue to impact homeowners, fisheries, farmers, and cattle ranchers, as well as the forestry, mining and, shipping industries. Property owners near salmon-bearing rivers or shorelines are enduring much of the cost of salmon recovery by being told how to use their land and their resources.

Is it worth it? The truth is that it really does not matter whether we think it is right or wrong to preserve the salmon. Our laws say that we must. Our obligation now is to make certain our efforts, our sacrifices, and our dollars are not wasted.

Unfortunately, to date, a major element of the salmon recovery equation has all but been ignored by decision-makers. We simply have not taken a sufficient look at protecting wild endangered Pacific salmon that have made it safely to the sea, grown to full size, and now need to make it home to their native streams to spawn. We have provided habitat, spawning beds, and worked on ever-safer downstream passage for salmon offspring. However, unless we ensure that spawning-ready adults are being provided the opportunity to return home to spawn, all of these efforts may be fruitless.

In fact, it already appears that very few salmon are currently making it home to spawn. According to a combined report from the Pacific Salmon Council and an Independent Scientific Advisory Board for the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, the average total harvest rate for Snake River Fall Chinook between 1985 and 2002 is estimated to have been as high as 55-60%. This means that less than half of the endangered adults were able to spawn and replenish the salmon population.

We certainly have an obligation to do more than tackle habitat, hatcheries, and hydropower. We must look at all components of this growing problem. We owe this to everyone in the Pacific Northwest – including fishermen, taxpayers, ratepayers, landowners, tribal members, and farmers – who currently bear the burden of salmon recovery.

As Members of the Northwest Congressional delegation, we believe there is merit to beginning an important discussion about the protection of adult salmon until they can spawn. That's why we are turning our attention to this matter by hosting a series of public meetings around the region to fully explore all of the factors that interfere with endangered adult salmon returning home to spawn. We will be holding the first of these public meetings this week in the Vancouver and Puget Sound areas.

We are coming together as Members from different political parties and different areas of the Pacific Northwest with a shared motivation to restore wild salmon and ensure that our dollars and our land are not being wasted. We hope that interested parties will join us as we initiate this essential discussion, and we look forward to seeing you at our upcoming public meetings.